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ABSTRACT

Following a brief attempt to find a synonym for oral communication (i.e., speaking and listening) the research on listening is referred to in an effort to stress the need for more instruction in listening and reading skills. It is pointed out the listening is an indispensable tool in the teaching of reading and provides the foundation on which all other language arts skills are based. The remainder of the document lists instructional materials for teaching listening skills and describes the "Listen and Think Program," which is designed to improve the listening comprehension and specific analytical, critical, and thinking skills of elementary students. (RB)

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Communication Skills--Listening & Reading[1]

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The new Random House Dictionary defines "literacy" as the quality or state of being literate. "Literate" is further defined as: (1) able to read and write; (2) having an education; and (3) a learned person. This definition of the learned or educated person is decidedly one-sided; it is concerned only with skill in the area of written communication. It would appear reasonable that there should be a parallel term for the person educated or learned in the skills of oral communication--speaking and listening.

The lack of such a term indicates the lack of emphasis placed by educators on these skills. "Oracy" has been coined by a group of British researchers as a term for the skills of listening and speaking which would parallel "literacy" for the skills of reading and writing. This term does not appear in the Random House Dictionary, but the word "orate" (as parallel to "literate") does. Unfortunately, "orate" appears only as a verb--and then it is defined as "to speak pompously or pretentiously--to deliver an oration." "Oration" is defined as "a formal speech, characterized by studied or elevated style, diction or delivery; a speech delivered on a formal occasion, as on an anniversary, a funeral, or at academic exercises." This certainly tells us something about the connotations of words having to do with "oracy"! Perhaps it also explains why listening, the most basic of the communication skills, and the first communication skill acquired by the young child, has been virtually ignored in instruction at every grade level.

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Reading and Listening

The results of studies reported as far back as forty years ago indicated that adults listen almost three times more than they read and that students spend almost 60% of their class time in listening activities. These findings are consistently reinforced in current research. Nevertheless, a recent survey of college communication courses revealed that, while there was almost universal inclusion of listening improvement as one of the principal goals, only lip service was given to this in most cases. The findings of a 1965 study which analyzed the listening content of American pupil textbooks in language arts for grades three through six published from 1959-1964 indicated that writing, grammar and review lessons were emphasized to such an extent that only .63% of the 7,744 lessons and .57% of the 15,285.5 pages of material emphasized instruction in listening!

One of the most positive effects of the technology and media explosion during the last several years has been the sharp increase in interest in listening skills. Most of the new media is multi-sensory and listening is therefore a specific requirement of its use. In researching the effects of such new media as TV, teaching machines and the like, we have discovered that many of our basic but untested assumptions about communication behavior don't hold up. For example, the assumption that the able speaker is also a good listener is unfounded; the assumption that the teaching of speaking skills results in the learning of listening skills is not necessarily true and incidental instruction of the "Now, listen carefully, children" variety does not result in effective listening if the children have never learned the skills of "careful listening".

On the other hand, one assumption which teachers have generally made, (but which, unfortunately, they haven't done much about) has been confirmed in the research: the skills of listening and reading are related, and instruction in either area can reinforce the development of skill in the other.

That listening is an indispensible tool in the teaching of reading is generally accepted by most teachers. Oral reading, for example, is included in instruction in just about every approach to teaching reading. Here again, however, we are faced with the one-sided approach: the concern has not been with developing listening skills through reading, but rather reading skills through listening.

Listening and reading are both receptive aspects of communication. There are certain differences in these two aspects, however. When we read, we have time to analyze unknown words--to use context clues, word analysis skills, dictionaries, and the like. We can control the rate of reception--the speed at which we read. Cues such as punctuation and capitalization help with understanding. We can reread a phrase or a sentence or a paragraph if we are not clear as to the author's purpose, or to integrate, assimilate, and respond to the author's mood or meaning.

The listener, on the other hand, must depend on the speaker's organizational and speaking ability. The listener has no control over rate of words received from a speaker. He cannot go back and relisten to a sentence or a paragraph and ponder its meaning. If the listener does not have adequately developed auditory perception skills, he may have difficulty identifying spoken words. If he does not have a strong listening vocabulary, he may have difficulty perceiving relationships or discriminating among word meanings.

Perhaps an example is relevant here. At a high level military meeting during the second World War, British and American officers were attempting to solve an urgent strategy problem. At a crucial point, one of the British officers suggested that an issue considered vital by both sides be "tabled". A heated argument arose between the British and Americans concerning the pros and cons of tabling. It was not until a considerable period of time had been

wasted deliberating the issue of "tabling" that it was discovered that the British definition of this word involved putting the issue "on the table"--discussing it, while the American definition involved placing the issue "under the table"--holding it for future discussion!

On the other hand, the listener has sharper communication cues--a gesture, a facial expression, a voice inflection can convey meaning that written expression cannot. However, these cues may mislead the listener. If the receiver of an oral communication has not developed good listening habits--if, for example, he is inattentive or half-listening or overreacting to sharply inflected or emotionally-laden words--much of what he hears may either be incomprehensible or incapable of appropriate interpretation and reaction.

There are many skills, especially those of critical thinking, which are common to both reading and listening. These include such word perception skills as recall of word meaning and deduction of meaning of unknown words, and such specific comprehension skills as noting details, organizing content into main and subordinate ideas, and selecting and identifying information pertinent to a specific topic. Other critical thinking skills common to both effective listening and reading are recognizing purpose, distinguishing between fact and opinion, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, understanding character, recognizing climax, sharing feelings, and recognizing cause-effect relationships.

Teaching Listening

Listening provides the foundation on which all other language arts skills are based. In the developmental scheme, listening precedes speaking, reading, and writing. The student who cannot listen effectively cannot learn effectively. It is as simple as that.

Research results clearly indicate that instruction in listening improves facility in listening. Why, then, have teachers ignored instruction in listening? Perhaps, as the study discussed earlier suggests, one reason involves lack of knowledge concerning the specific skills to be taught and specific materials and methods which effectively teach these skills. In an effort to provide information to help solve these problems, Dr. Sam Duker of Brooklyn College has just published an extensive Bibliography concerning available research results, methods, materials, and evaluation tools in the area of Listening. This is available from the Scarecrow Press, Metuchin, New Jersey.

Perhaps another reason for teacher hesitancy in providing instruction in this area is lack of knowledge concerning how to plan lessons involving listening. In selecting both the skills to be taught and the methods for teaching them to various kinds of learners at various instructional levels, the teacher must be guided by the best information available in professional journals, texts, and courses of study at the pre-service and in-service levels. There is insufficient evidence available as to which instructional emphases are likely to produce the most effective listening results. However, we do the best we can.

In A Dynamic Approach to Language Arts, published by McGraw-Hill, Logan and Logan provide a variety of lessons at the elementary grade level which serve as examples of appropriate listening instructional sequences. In one such lesson, "Listening for Information", they offer as the specific objective: To help children listen to recall facts, ideas, and principles with accuracy. Those behaviors which will indicate that this objective has been met are then specified, including: Noting sequence of ideas, watching for transitional phrases and changes of subject, and relating supporting ideas. Ten teaching techniques are included, as are seventeen teaching activities and five evaluation questions. I believe you will find these lessons most useful.

For those of you who are teaching at the secondary level, I would like to draw your attention to a unit on Listening which appeared in the professional journal, The Speech Teacher, Volume 8, March, 1959, as part of a basic course in Fundamentals of Speech for High Schools. This comprehensive unit includes introductory materials in listening, objectives, content, activities and techniques and evaluation methods.

A variety of published materials concerned with listening activities and games are also available to teachers. David and Elizabeth Russell have collected 190 listening activities in their book, Listening Aids Through the Grades, published by Teachers College Press. These are listed by general school levels. Lists of references and materials for teachers are also provided, including audio-visual aids. Wagner, Hosier and Blackman have published a collection of Listening Games (Teachers Publishing Company), presented in order of difficulty. Games which are "easy to play" include those in which children listen for sound, rhyming games, and memory games. Games which "challenge top intellects" include activities designed to give practice in listening intently in order to identify the common meters used in poetry, or to listen attentively in order to associate names of well-known authors with titles of their books. All games are classified by specific grade level. Listening activities and games are also listed in many professional tests in reading and other language arts.

Skill exercises in listening are provided in such commercially published language arts materials as the Reading Laboratory published by Science Research Associates, and the Listen and Read Program developed by Education Development Laboratory (EDL). While these materials are prepared for individualized instruction, they can also be used with small or large class groupings.

EDL has recently published a new developmental program in the area of listening, the Listen and Think Program. Designed to improve listening comprehension and specific analytical, critical, and appreciative thinking skills

necessary for good listening, the program covers reading grade levels three through twelve, and includes a series of fifteen tape recordings with an accompanying student lesson book for each level. The materials are self-instructional and except for instruction in how to use the materials do not require the intervention of a human teacher. Speeded listening or compressed speech activities are also included.

Almost thirty years ago, results of research studies indicated that people can listen to speech at a rate of more than three times that at which they normally hear it. However, it has only been during the past several years that active research interest has developed in the extent to which people can be taught to comprehend auditory material when it is presented at rates faster than human speakers can produce it--speeded or accelerated listening. A relatively new application to education of the technological revolution is time-compression of speech. Time-compression involves the processing of a tape recording in such a way that the material is presented at a higher rate than the initial recording without producing significant changes in such speech characteristics as frequency, pitch, intonation and stress patterns.

Research studies in time-compressed speech during the past two decades have resulted in several major findings: (1) People find some degree of accelerated speech intelligible and comprehensible; (2) After about 275-300 w.p.m., comprehension begins to decline significantly. However, the exact degree of acceleration, type of material, individual aptitudes and abilities, motivation, presentation conditions and the like have not been ascertained; (3) Retention of material presented under accelerated conditions is not adversely affected as compared to presentation under normal conditions; (4) There is substantial variability in individual ability to comprehend compressed speech.

Most of the research with time-compressed speech has involved adult subjects. The few studies which have been done with children at the elementary

grade level have provided evidence that accelerated listening can be an efficient and effective learning medium for this age group. At the University of Calgary, we are now involved in both preliminary and planned comprehensive studies with children at the elementary grade level in which we will be using the EDL Listen and Think Programs as well as other materials to investigate both time-compressed and non-compressed speech and listening variables. We will be sharing our results with interested teachers as the studies are completed.

In Conclusion

The literate, orate person is able to read, write, listen, and speak effectively and efficiently. Literacy and oracy are both essential instructional goals. Does your instructional program include these objectives? It must, because the nature and nurture of listening and reading are the responsibilities of all of us who teach at any instructional level.